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ABSTRACT

This digest examines the extent and nature of Hispanic college enrollment in comparison to that of other racial and ethnic groups. Patterns of college entry and participation are analyzed by nativity, ethnicity, and age. College completion data show that while roughly 10 percent of Hispanic high school completers finish their schooling with an associate's degree, similar to their white peers, they markedly trail their white peers in finishing a bachelor's degree. Only 16 percent of high school educated Hispanics finished a bachelor's degree, compared to nearly 37 percent of their white peers. Undergraduate enrollment patterns indicate that Hispanic college students are concentrated in community colleges and are the least likely young college students to pursue their studies full-time. The digest discusses reasons for Hispanic students lagging other groups in attaining college degrees, including delayed postsecondary enrollment, part-time enrollment, not having a regular high school diploma, working full-time, being financially independent, having children or dependents, and being a single parent. The data analyzed in the digest also show that Hispanics lag far behind in pursuing post-baccalaureate education, mainly because they lag in bachelor's degree completion. (Contains 11 references.) (SM)

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HISPANICS IN COLLEGE: PARTICIPATION AND DEGREE ATTAINMENT

Latinos lag every other major population group in attaining college degrees, especially bachelor's degrees (Vernez & Mizell, 2002). This partly reflects the difficulties Hispanic youth have in completing high school and the influx of adult less-educated Latino immigrants, but the outcomes of Latinos in postsecondary education require attention as well.

Large numbers of Latinos are enrolled in postsecondary education. In fact, by some measures, a greater share of Hispanics is attending college than non-Hispanic whites. However, most Latino undergraduates are pursuing paths associated with lower chances of attaining a bachelor's degree. Many are enrolled in community colleges, many also only attend school part-time, and others delay or prolong their college education into their mid-20s and beyond. Given the relatively high college enrollment rates of Latino high school completers, improvements in the college persistence rates of Latino youth would greatly increase the number of highly educated Latinos and their participation in graduate and professional education. This digest examines the extent and nature of Hispanic college enrollment in comparison to that of other racial and ethnic groups.

College Entry and Participation

Hispanic youth *that complete U.S. secondary education* do not markedly lag similar white youth in obtaining postsecondary education. By age 26, Latino high school completers are as likely as white high school completers to obtain some postsecondary education (NCES, 2002a). However, the timing of entry into postsecondary education is consequential to degree completion, and immediate entry into college may have a positive impact on college completion. Seventy-one percent of Latino high school graduates immediately enter postsecondary education, in comparison to 76 percent of white high school graduates (NCES, 1997).

Nativity. Immigrant Latino high school completers are as likely as second generation and third and higher generation Latino youth to immediately enter postsecondary education (NCES, 1998). This applies only to immigrant Latino youth that arrive sufficiently early in childhood to enroll in U.S. secondary education. This result is consistent with immigrant Latino secondary school outcomes. Immigrant Latino youth enrolled in U.S. schools are no more likely to drop out of high school than native-born Latino youth (Driscoll, 1999). There are no generational differences in academic performance among Latino high school students (Kao, 1999).

Ethnicity. Cubans have by far the highest rate of college attendance of any Latino national origin group, with nearly 45 percent of 18- to 24-year-old high school graduates enrolled. For Mexicans, the comparable figure is 33 percent and for Puerto Ricans, 30 percent (Fry, 2002).

Age. Colleges do not just serve young adults. Beyond "traditional college age," i.e., beyond age 24, Hispanic high school completers are more likely to be enrolled in undergraduate education than white high school completers. Seven percent of Hispanic high school completers over the age of 24 are enrolled in college at any moment in time, in comparison to 5 percent of similarly aged white high school completers (Fry, 2002). The relatively high participation of older Latino high school completers in college should be interpreted carefully. While indicative of the wide accessibility of the U.S. postsecondary education system, one wonders why these adults are pursuing college later in life. The greatest economic gains from college clearly go to individuals that complete their education early in life.

College Completion

Roughly 10 percent of Hispanic high school completers finish their schooling with an associate's degree, similar to their white peers. Latino high-school-educated youth, however, markedly trail their white peers in finishing a bachelor's degree. Between the ages of 25 to 29, nearly 37 percent of high-school-educated whites have finished a bachelor's degree, in comparison to 16 percent of their Hispanic peers. There are no marked generational differences in bachelor's degree completion among Latino high-school-educated 25-to-29 year-olds (Fry, 2002).

Undergraduate Enrollment Patterns

Young Latino undergraduates attend college and universities differently from their white peers.

Community Colleges. Both entry and enrollment data reveal that Hispanic college students are concentrated in community colleges. About 44 percent of Latino 18- to 24-year-old undergraduates attend two-year institutions compared to about 30 percent of white and African American undergraduates in that age group (Fry, 2002). This high rate of enrollment partly results from the geographic concentration of Hispanics in California. However, outside of California, Latino undergraduates are also more likely to enroll in community colleges than white undergraduates. There is no substantial difference across generations in the share of Latino undergraduates ages 18 to 24 who go to community college. The share is about the same for the foreign born, 46 percent, as it is for the second generation, 42 percent. Hispanic enrollment in two-year colleges varies considerably by national origin. Some 48 percent of Mexican undergraduates in the 18- to 24-year-old group attend two-year institutions compared to about 32 percent of Puerto Ricans (Fry, 2002).

The concentration of Latino undergraduates in community colleges likely contributes to the difference in bachelor's degree attainment between white and Latino high school completers. Undergraduates aspiring to a bachelor's degree are much more likely to obtain a bachelor's degree within six years if they begin their education at a four-year college rather than a two-year college. For example, 26 percent of recent high school graduates aspiring to a bachelor's degree had a bachelor's degree within six years if they began at a community college. Over 62 percent of similar bachelor's degree aspirants had a bachelor's within six

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years if they began at a four-year college (NCES, 2002b).

Enrollment Intensity. Hispanics are the least likely young college students to be pursuing their studies full-time. Among 18-to-24-year-olds, 85 percent of white and African American students go full-time. Seventy-four percent of similar Latino college students attend full-time. Degree completion is associated with enrollment intensity. Among undergraduates beginning postsecondary education at community colleges, 43 percent attained a postsecondary credential if they were initially enrolled full-time (Fry, 2002). Among similar undergraduates initially enrolled part-time, 30 percent completed a postsecondary credential. Among undergraduates that began at public 4-year colleges, initial enrollment intensity had a marked effect. Of those initially enrolled full-time, 57 percent completed a bachelor's degree. Only 28 percent of those initially enrolled part-time finished a bachelor's degree (NCES, 2002b).

College Persistence Factors

There are marked differences in some college persistence rates between Hispanic undergraduates and white undergraduates. These differences are prevalent mainly in the completion of bachelor's degrees. Regardless of whether the undergraduate began at a community college or 4-year college, the likelihood of obtaining an associate's degree or certificate seems similar between Hispanic and white students. However, a wide gulf emerges with regard to bachelor's degree attainment. Among undergraduates that began at community colleges, 6 percent of Latinos and 12 percent of whites had finished a bachelor's degree 6 years after starting college. If the student began at a public 4-year institution, 56 percent of whites had attained a bachelor's within 6 years of entry, but only 40 percent of Latinos (NCES, 2002b).

In analyses of college persistence, the U.S. Department of Education identifies seven "risk factors" or undergraduate attributes that negatively relate to persistence and degree attainment: delayed postsecondary enrollment, part-time enrollment, not having a regular high school diploma, working full-time, being financially independent, having children or dependents, and being a single parent. There is little doubt that, in the aggregate, Hispanic undergraduates are more likely to possess these "risky attributes" than white undergraduates (NCES, 2002c). On each of the seven factors, Hispanic undergraduates are more "at risk." This is not surprising since Hispanic undergraduates tend to be older and are more likely to be "nontraditional students." In fact, the persistence risk factors are identical to characteristics identifying "nontraditional students." Whether the persistence risk factors can account for the differences in specific college persistence rates between white and Latino undergraduates remains to be documented.

Graduate and Professional Enrollment

Hispanics lag far behind in pursuing post baccalaureate education. Among 25- to 34-year-old high school completers, 4 percent of whites are enrolled in graduate or professional studies, but only 2 percent of Latinos (Fry, 2002). This can be accounted for largely by the gap in bachelor's degree completion. Studies of the post baccalaureate enrollment behavior of recent college graduates reveal that about 17 percent of recent college graduates pursue graduate or professional studies within a year of college graduation, and there are no significant racial/ethnic differences in the likelihood of further education (NCES, 1996). Latinos lag in graduate and professional education, but that appears to be attributable to the fact that they lag in bachelor's degree completion.

Conclusion

Heretofore, policy-makers and researchers concerned with Hispanic educational achievement have focused most intently on issues related to primary and secondary education, especially high school dropout rates. Those issues are undoubtedly important. However, the successes and shortcomings of Latino youth in postsecondary education should not be overlooked. Significant gains can be made with policy initiatives targeted at Latinos who graduated from high school, who applied for and were granted admission to a two- or four-year college, and who enrolled. In other words, a great deal can be accomplished by assisting young Hispanics who are trying to secure the postsecondary credentials they need to improve their prospects but are failing to do so in large numbers.

—Richard Fry
Pew Hispanic Center

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